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MONTANA DNRConversation

A Newsletter of the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation • Director Bud Clinch

Fall 2001

—FIRE SEASON 2000: THE AFTERMATH—

The fire season of 2000 was one of the most devastating in Montana's history.

Before the smoke cleared, DNRC professionals were in the field assessing the damage to timber stands, riparian areas, watersheds, and communities. Whether cruising burned timber or acquiring state and federal dollars for recovery efforts, many employees were tasked with additional duties. Thousands of hours were directed toward suppressing the fires, but even more time and energy will be devoted to salvage, rehabilitation, and prevention on private, state, and federal land.

This issue of *DNRConversation* presents several examples of those efforts. Many of them efforts benefit from assistance available through the National Fire Plan (NFP). The projects also illustrate how various DNRC divisions, bureaus, and employee are cooperating with each other, and how DNRC is joining forces with other agencies, to deal with the aftermath of the 2000 fire season.

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PHOTO BY BRIAN LONG

Reviewing damage, Sula State Forest, August 2000, are (left to right) Scott McLeod, Ross Baty, and Steve Kamps

NATIONAL FIRE PLAN

After the record-breaking wildfire season of 2000, Congress adopted a National Fire Plan (NFP) that had been developed jointly by the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior to respond to severe wildland fires, reduce their impacts on communities, and assure sufficient firefighting capabilities for the future. NFP includes five key points:

- firefighting preparedness
- rehabilitation and restoration of burned areas
- reduction of hazardous fuels
- community assistance
- accountability

Congress also appropriated more than $1 billion for fire recovery, rehabilitation, and prevention. This NFP money was channeled through many federal and state agencies, including DNRC's Forestry Division (FD). FD's Paula Rosenthal, who is the NFP coordinator, said that DNRC is currently administering about $3 million in NFP monies that were dedicated to Montana. This money is separated into different categories and programs, several of which support the salvage, recovery, and prevention efforts featured in this issue.

"To help ensure Montana's land and water resources provide benefits for present and future generations."

——A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR——

As our extended fall continues, I hope you all get a chance to enjoy some aspect of Montana's great outdoors.

As you know, we at DNRC play a great role in stewarding much of Montana's precious landscape. While we all quietly go about fulfilling our roles at DNRC, we often fail to reflect on our cumulative accomplishments. Whether it's the millions of acres of state-owned land, thousands of miles of waterways, infrastructures in most municipalities, or private agricultural and forested lands, chances are one of your co-workers has had a hand in it in some way.

While this past year may not have been a record breaker in any category, it provided ample challenge on a number of fronts.

A barn burner of a fire season was forecast, but, due to aggressive suppression efforts and a little luck, we dodged a major bullet. However, the Forestry Division's efforts did amount to nearly $8 million, exceeded only by the expenditures in the 2000 fire season.

On the water front, we mostly went without and are still in dire need of precipitation. The Water Resources Division continues to work closely with irrigators, municipalities, river users, and others to minimize conflicts in this time of shortage. While some locales are close to normal, overall soil moisture is in a deficit and will be a considerable problem next season if we don't get major rain and snow over the winter.

In an arena where many don't know of DNRC's role, the Conservation and Resource Development Division (CARDD) is going about its business of allocating grant dollars for various reclamation and other resource projects. In addition, its two revolving fund accounts continue to fund dozens of municipal wastewater and drinking water system improvements. So, when you go to Jackson, Geraldine, Denton, Fairview, Ennis, Ekalaka, Shelby, Wibaux, Hysham — and use the "facilities" — thank CARDD.

The Reserved Water Rights Compact Commission, Oil and Gas Conservation Division, Trust Land Management Division, and Centralized Services Division equally complement our accomplishments.

We're everywhere! So, as you travel east for that hunting trip or over the divide to a Grizzly game (p-o-o-r Bobcats), look around at Montana in her fall glory, and take pride that you're part of DNRC: "*Helping to ensure Montana's land and water resources provide benefits for present and future generations.*"

Director Bud Clinch

Fire Season. . . *continued from page 1*

Salvage

Sula State Forest. In August 2000, wildfires burned over 12,000 acres in the Sula State Forest, south of Darby. DNRC's Trust Land Management Division acted quickly to capture timber values that were at imminent risk of loss and to mitigate the effects of the wildfire. The remarkable efforts expended in connection with the Sula project merited both the Governor's Award of Excellence and the DNRC Director's Team Award (see related story).

Within a three-month period, the Hamilton Unit Office, with help from other unit offices, had planned and executed the sale of seven separate timber sales located in the Sula State Forest. Harvesting the burned timber ensured that the trusts will receive at least a portion of the approximately $12 million value of the timber prior to the fires. Additionally, salvage harvesting reduced fuels, helped prevent erosion, and reduced bark beetle populations. Jon Hayes, DNRC's MEPA coordinator for the Sula State Mitigation, Salvage, and Recovery Project, said that the people of Montana, wildlife habitat, and the state forest would all ultimately benefit.

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Fire Season. . . *continued from page 2*

The timber was harvested in the winter to minimize impacts to the soil, roadways, riparian areas, and streams. During the height of last winter's operation, approximately 100 truckloads of salvaged logs were removed daily from the Sula State Forest. Approximately 134,000 tons or about 21 million board feet of fire-burned timber have been removed from the project area to date. Phase II began this summer, with most of the harvesting to be done this coming winter.

DNRC is taking steps throughout the salvage process to help the area to regenerate itself quickly, while ensuring that erosion is controlled. Tony Liane, DNRC Area Manager, said that contractors are required to follow our guidance strictly with regard to the timber sale contract, the environmental assessment, best management practices, and the State Forest Land Management Plan to ensure that the resources are managed responsibly.

Recovery and Rehabilitation

Sula State Forest. In addition to the timber salvage operation in the Sula State Forest, reforestation, regeneration, and erosion control projects have been underway. Steve Kamps, project leader on the Sula project, coordinated the activities during the summer of 2001. Rehabilitation included obliterating roads, planting tree seedlings, placing straw mats for soil and stream bank stabilization, and seeding grasses.

Due to the enormous effort put forth on the Sula project and the nature of the fires, the Sula State Forest has become something of a research laboratory. Through tree mortality monitoring practices, photograph points, watershed monitoring, and regeneration surveys, foresters will be learning a great deal about regeneration practices, fire rehabilitation, and silvicultural practices that will be applied to future timber sales and salvage projects.

Spokane Hills. In the early fall of 2000, shortly after the Bucksnort Fire in the Spokane Hills east of Helena was extinguished, DNRC provided funds to Lewis and Clark Conservation District for erosion and sediment control work, which was done by the Youth Conservation Corps.

In February 2001, DNRC's Conservation and Resource Development Division (CARDD) helped the Lewis and Clark and Broadwater Conservation Districts with a huge project — reseeding approximately 3,820 acres of fire-damaged land. The project used the aerial seeding process, spreading a minimum of 45 seeds per square foot in the areas that had burned with the highest intensity. Approximately 38,000 pounds of seed were spread across private, state, and federal land along the west shore of Canyon Ferry Lake, where the fire had burned at Level I intensity. A Level 1 fire is the most intense fire possible, leaving burned root systems and soil productivity that is significantly reduced. No shrub stumps or small fuels remain on the forest floor, and standing trees can be charcoal from 0.5" to 1" deep.

The objective of the aerial seeding was to jumpstart the regeneration process, allowing those seeds to begin growing with the coming of spring moisture. New vegetation helps stabilize the soil surface, protects the area from the erosion that is inevitable in fire-stricken areas, and discourages invasion by noxious weeds. In the absence of seeding, it would take from five to seven years for a desirable plant community to re-colonize the area, according to Lex Riggle, district conservationist with the U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

The $78,000 price tag on the seeding project was spread among several agencies. DNRC provided $15,000 through the Emergency Loan Program administered by CARDD, Broadwater Conservation District contributed $4,500, and NRCS provided the balance through its Emergency Watershed Protection Program. Riggle said that, without DNRC's help, NRCS and the conservation districts would have had to collect cost sharing money from about 50 landowners whose lives had already been greatly impacted.

The aerial seeding was only a portion of an overall vegetation management plan for the Bucksnort Fire area. The U.S. Bureau of Land Management, NRCS, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Lewis and Clark Conservation District, DNRC's CARRD, and private landowners are cooperatively developing and implementing that plan.

Prevention

Cost Share Program. DNRC received $570,000 of National Fire Plan Title IV funds to assist individual, non-industrial private forest (NIPF) landowners impacted by the fires of 2000. Within federal criteria, the money is being used to fund two educational grants, a private forestry assistance specialist, and the Wildfire

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Fire Season. . . *continued from page 3*

Recovery, Rehabilitation, and Prevention Cost-Share Program. The cost share program will help landowners by funding 75 percent of the cost of rehabilitating fire-damaged land or reducing fire/fuel hazards.

Initially $280,000 of the total cost share funding ($400,000) was offered, and applications were accepted during June 2001. Statewide, 187 applications were submitted for projects totaling over $900,000 on over 10,000 acres. The 79 projects that were approved include replanting forests and forest range, revegetating riparian areas, minimizing erosion, protecting water quality, and reducing the fire hazard around homes and forested property.

The response of NIPF landowners indicates an awareness and willingness to take action in the wake of last year's fires. Another application period this fall will prepare more projects for the spring and summer of 2002.

The cost share program is operated cooperatively by the Service Forestry Bureau of DNRC's Forestry Division (FD), CARDD's Conservation Districts Bureau, and local conservation districts statewide. The unique partnership of conservation district officials and state foresters delivers a seamless, professional service, making it easy for the landowners to steward their land.

Defensible Space Audits. Another fire prevention activity, funded through the NFP Community Assistance Program, is called the Defensible Space Audit Program. In July, FD began offering free on-site evaluations for homeowners living in the "wildland/urban interface." This program assists Montanans in preventing fires by reducing fuel hazards that endanger their property.

Congress has increased appropriations to the National Fire Plan, and NFP Coordinator Paula Rosenthal said that, over the next two years, approximately 1,800 homes in Montana would be audited. To meet this expected demand, DNRC is partnering with rural and volunteer fire departments and private forestry consultants.

Former DNRC Fire Prevention Supervisor Ed Mathews said that the program is simple and easy to use. Homeowners contact the nearest DNRC area or unit office. A DNRC employee, rural or volunteer fire department official, or contracted consultant will then visit the homeowner. After the one-hour visit, the homeowner will receive a written, comprehensive audit, similar to a home energy audit. In addition, the fire professional will provide suggestions for making the house and property less susceptible to a wildland fire.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY BRIAN LONG

Brian Long, Moose Fire

Big Mountain Fuels/ Hazard Reduction. The Big Mountain Fuels/Hazard Reduction Project is funded by the National Fire Plan via the state Fire Assistance Program. This

Fire Season. . . *continued on page 6*

—SULA SALVAGE EFFORT PROMPTS AWARDS—

The fires of 2000 scorched almost 1 million acres in Montana, with more than 300,000 acres burned in the Bitterroot Valley. During the emergency, many of DNRC's forest management personnel were taken away from their regular duties to suppress wildfires and protect communities. When the smoke cleared, they moved quickly to implement rehabilitation measures (seeding grass, installing culverts and erosion barriers, etc.) and to salvage fire-killed timber.

Forest management objectives had not been relaxed (to allow for the time diverted to firefighting support); nonetheless, the Southwestern Land Office achieved 157 percent of its timber objectives in a 3-month period. Perhaps the most impressive accomplishment took place in the Bitterroot Valley's Sula State Forest. Over 20 million board feet of fire-killed timber was logged on the Hamilton Unit, resulting in about $3 million in revenues for the various school and public building trust funds and over $1 million for reforestation activities.

This massive effort earned the Governor's Award of Excellence for its leaders, called the "Sula Project Core Team." The eight individuals honored for their contribution as part of this team are:

Jeff Collins
Gary Frank
Jon Hayes
Steve Kamps
Mark Lewing
Paul Moore
Ken Roberts
Bob Storer

The DNRC Director's Team Award went to another 60 employees who were instrumental in the Sula efforts in a variety of ways. These persons, called the "Sula Project Team," received individual certificates as well as a team plaque.

Ross Baty
Tony Bengford
Ashleigh Burwick
Dan Bushnell
John Carey
Kevin Chappell
Bud Clinch
Connie Daruk
Michelle Ekstrom
Jay Fassett
Norm Fortunate
Kurt Gelderman
Brian Gilbert
Jason Hagen
Jeff Hagener
Mark Hannah
Jon Hansen
Deb Harrison
Brad Herman
Howard Kent
Paul Klug
Jason Kopp
Kate Kronen
Janie Kurth
Rosemary Leach
Donna Leeper
Tony Liane
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Patrick Rennie
Bob Rich
Brian Robbins
Bill Schultz
Tom Schultz
Chris Seletten
Frank Sherman
Rich Stocker
Jon Straughn
Brad Sult
Philip Sundberg
Bruce Swick
Eric Trimble
Steve Wallace
Michael Wiederhold
David Williams
Jeff Wilson
Will Wood

Congratulations to all of you.

Sula Core Team: (back row, from left) Ken Roberts, Steve Kamps, Mark Lewing, and Bob Storer; (front row, from left) Paul Moore, Jon Hayes, Jeff Collins, and Gary Frank.

—OUTSTANDING EMPLOYEE AWARDS—

Each year one exceptional DNRC employee is singled out for the Director's Outstanding Employee Award. This year, however, the honor was conferred upon two persons: Kraig Van Voast, water resource specialist in the Havre Water Resources Regional Office, and Bill Greiman, civil/agricultural engineer with the staff of the Reserved Water Rights Compact Commission.

Kraig and Bill were chosen as a result of their outstanding work in negotiating and finalizing agreements with water users on Peoples Creek as part of the State of Montana's compact with the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine Tribes of the Fort Belknap Reservation. The Fort Belknap Compact allocates water from the Milk River and quantifies the tribal water rights in Beaver Creek and Missouri River Basin 40EJ, as well as in Peoples Creek. After almost 15 years of negotiations and technical work, the compact was preliminarily approved by the Fort Belknap Community Council, passed the Montana Legislature, and was signed by the governor last April.

Good job, Kraig and Bill!

Director Bud Clinch, Bill Greiman, and Kraig Van Voast

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project, which encompasses about 16,000 acres, is centered on Big Mountain Ski Resort.

For many years, DNRC fire personnel have considered this area to be of high risk because of its wildland/urban interface problem, access situation, and fuel load. Kalispell Unit Fire Supervisor Greg Poncin said that, if a wildfire were to start in the area, it would be devastating. The DNRC Kalispell Unit Office applied for and received a $195,000 grant for the four-phased Big Mountain Fuels/Hazard Reduction Project.

Project activities will reduce fuels, assist landowners in defensible space landscaping around homes and subdivisions, and improve access for emergency response vehicles. A newsletter will be published to inform residents of the activities and let them know what they can do to help.

The Kalispell Unit has been working with area residents, landowners, and homeowners. Other partners in the project include the Big Mountain Fire Department and the Montana Department of Transportation.

• • •

State agencies, federal agencies, conservation districts, fire departments, and private landowners are all addressing the aftermath of the fires of 2000 and taking steps to prevent future disasters. With their dedication and cooperation, and the professionalism of our foresters, Montana's forests will flourish!

THE RESERVED WATER RIGHTS COMPACT COMMISSION

The Montana Reserved Water Rights Compact Commission (RWRCC) was established in 1979 to negotiate, on behalf of the State of Montana, the quantification of federal reserved water rights within the state. A federal reserved water right is a right to water that was created when Congress or the president of the United States reserved land out of the public domain. The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that enough water be reserved to meet the purposes for which the reserved lands were designated. In Montana, federal reserved water rights are claimed in connection with Indian reservations and land managed by various federal agencies. Montana was one of the first states to attempt to quantify these water rights through negotiation, rather than litigation, and it is still the only state to do so using a commission.

RWRCC is composed of nine members who are appointed for four-year terms by the governor (four members), the president of the Montana Senate (two members), the speaker of the Montana House of Representatives (two members), and the attorney general (one member). If a legislatively appointed member is not re-elected before the end of the RWRCC term, then he or she is replaced by a newly appointed representative or senator. Current members are listed at right.

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An eleven-member staff supplies the commission with legal and historical research and technical analyses of settlement scenarios. The staff includes a program manager, two attorneys, two hydrologists, a historian, an agricultural engineer, a soil scientist, a GIS specialist, an information systems technician, and an administrative assistant.

The commission has successfully negotiated water rights compacts with the Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes of the Fort Peck Indian Reservation, the Northern Cheyenne Tribe, the Crow Tribe, the Chippewa Cree Tribe of the Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation, and the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine Tribes of the Fort Belknap Reservation. Compacts have also been negotiated with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service, and the U.S. Bureau of Land Management. The Montana Legislature has approved all of these compacts, but only the Fort Peck and the Northern Cheyenne compacts have been decreed by the Montana Water Court. The Northern Cheyenne and Rocky Boy's compacts have also been approved by Congress.

RESERVED WATER RIGHTS COMPACT COMMISSION

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Dillon
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REP. CINDY YOUNKIN
Bozeman
Attorney

——SAFETY DAY IN BILLINGS——

DNRC's Southern Land Office (SLO) and staff of the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) held a Safety Day at their offices at the Airport Industrial Park in Billings on September 12. The DNRC / DEQ safety coordinators organized the event to coincide with the Safety Day scheduled for state employees in Helena. It was impractical for any sizeable group from area offices to attend the Helena events, but organizers felt that a similar program could be presented in Billings.

Because of the infamous attacks on September 11 on the East Coast, the Helena program was postponed until October 16. Billings staff considered canceling their plans, but decided that it was more important than ever to get together and discuss safety measures, plans, and concerns for the building.

The turnout was excellent. Nearly every employee from the building attended the event, which included a potluck lunch. A crew from the Billings Fire Department was invited, as was a fire crew from the airport. Due to the extreme security measures that were put into place at the airport, however, the airport crew had to cancel.

SLO's Office Manager and Safety Coordinator Jan Wheeler and Rural Fire Coordinator Darrell Kurk, along with Steve Regele of DEQ, discussed the procedures to follow in case of a telephoned bomb threat. Everyone was instructed regarding how to handle the call and what would happen immediately after the call.

PHOTO BY DARRELL KURK

Karla Bornhoft and Jan Wheeler using fire extinguishers

Evacuation procedures were explained in detail. Emphasis was given to the importance of a "safe point" where employees would report after an evacuation so that an accurate head count could be taken prior to the arrival of emergency personnel.

Deputy Fire Marshall Ed Regele gave an informative presentation on fire safety and offered many useful ideas pertaining to evacuation plans. He encouraged staging a fire drill occasionally to make sure that everyone understands the plan.

After his presentation, Ed set up portable fire equipment and presented the "hands on" extinguisher train-

Safety Day. . . *continued on page 10*

——OIL AND GAS INSPECTORS HONORED——

Six employees of DNRC's Oil and Gas Conservation Division have successfully completed a national certification test for field inspectors and were honored by the Interstate Oil and Gas Compact Commission (IOGCC) at the Billings Petroleum Club.

The IOGCC's National Inspector Certification Program ensures that state oil and natural gas officials have the knowledge necessary to conduct effective inspections of production operations. The program establishes national standards that state regulatory agencies can use to certify personnel who are responsible for inspecting oil and natural gas wells. Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Utah, and Wyoming are the six states that offer this voluntary field inspector certification.

The six DNRC field inspectors who passed the examination and were issued certificates are:

- Steven Sasaki, Chief Field Inspector, Billings
- Ron Dumontier, Shelby
- Darrell Hystad, Glendive
- Gary Klotz, Shelby
- Alan Olson, Roundup
- Robert Schmidt, Plentywood

The IOGCC represents the governors of 30 member states and 7 associate states. It promotes the conservation and efficient recovery of domestic oil and natural gas resources while protecting health, safety, and the environment.

——"BRIGHT LIGHT" AWARD FOR OIL AND GAS SYSTEM——

A risk-based data management system (RBDMS) used by the DNRC Oil and Gas Conversation Division (O&GCD) was selected by the U. S. Department of Energy (DOE) for one of its "Energy 100 Bright Light" Awards. The Bright Light Awards honor the 100 most successful DOE projects in the department's 25-year existence. Tom Richmond, O&GCD administrator, traveled to Washington, D.C., to accept the award for Montana's participation in the development of RBDMS.

The Groundwater Protection Council, together with staff from state agencies across the country, worked hard to develop RBDMS. The council is a national association of state, federal, and industry representatives interested in the protection of groundwater and the regulation of water resources.

RBDMS makes it easier to administer and regulate oil and gas activities. It is a computer database created to quickly and efficiently assess the environmental risks associated with injection wells and to manage the oil and gas data needs of state regulatory programs. Advanced data management techniques enable the Board of Oil and Gas Conservation to make better, more cost-effective regulatory decisions.

The software helps analyze and track information so that government and industry resources can be more effectively allocated. The software is flexible, allowing states to adapt it to their individual needs and providing for easy upgrades as the system evolves. One planned upgrade is "e-permitting," which would allow permits for oil and gas wells to be reviewed and renewed online and improve response time dramatically.

States using RBDMS have saved a combined $20 million of taxpayer money. More important than the money-saving attributes of RBDMS, however, is the greater confidence that state regulatory agencies can have in making environmental decisions that potentially affect drinking water.

[The risk-based data management system] is a computer database created to quickly and efficiently assess the environmental risks associated with injection wells and to manage the oil and gas data needs of state regulatory programs.

PHOTO COURTESY US DEPT. OF ENERGY

Tom Richmond, Oil and Gas Division Administrator, and David Alleman, U.S. Department of Energy

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ing that originally was to be done by the airport fire crew. Everyone was encouraged to practice using fire extinguishers of different sizes to put out a fire. Some had never used a fire extinguisher before and weren't quite sure what to expect. The equipment worked perfectly, and everyone got an "A" for the fire extinguisher class.

The Billings Fire Department sent two fire crews and ladder trucks with impressive equipment. The ropes on the flagpole at the office were becoming threadbare and knotted, and the Billings firemen used a ladder truck to reach and replace both ropes. Afterwards, they demonstrated just how high the ladder will go.

With the events of the preceding day still very vivid in everyone's mind, a moment was spent in silence, prayer, and sorrow.

After their Safety Day, Billings employees feel that they have a better understanding of how to handle an emergency if one comes their way. Personal safety and the safety of coworkers are the most important things. The rest are just things.

PHOTO BY DARRELL KURK

Billings firemen on the ladder truck

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Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation
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